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## Breaking the Silence of Mainstream Teachers' Attitude towards Inclusive Education in the Bahamas: High School Teachers' Perceptions

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## Breaking the Silence of Mainstream Teachers' Attitude towards Inclusive Education in the Bahamas: High School Teachers' Perceptions

### Abstract

There has been a paradigm shift globally regarding the adoption of inclusive education policies and procedures. However, teachers still have varying views, anxieties, and preconceived misconceptions about the successful implementation of inclusive education practices in the general education classroom. This study utilized a qualitative approach to provide an informative exploration of teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education and its implementation, possible factors that influence teachers' attitude, and recommendations for promoting best practices in inclusive education. Data was collected utilizing semi-structured interviews from eight teachers throughout the New Providence District in the Bahamas. The results of the study revealed that teachers generally had positive attitudes toward inclusion. However, lack of funding, administrative support and minimal opportunities for training and development were identified as negative influential factors regarding teachers' attitude towards inclusive education.

### Keywords

Attitudes, Inclusive Education, Bahamas, High School

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## **Breaking the Silence of Mainstream Teachers’ Attitude towards Inclusive Education in the Bahamas: High School Teachers’ Perceptions**

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*There has been a paradigm shift globally regarding the adoption of inclusive education policies and procedures. However, teachers still have varying views, anxieties, and preconceive misconceptions about the successful implementation of inclusive education practices in the general education classroom. This study utilized a qualitative approach to provide an informative exploration of teachers’ attitudes toward inclusive education and its implementation, possible factors that influence teachers’ attitude, and recommendations for promoting best practices in inclusive education. Data was collected utilizing semi-structured interviews from eight teachers throughout the New Providence District in the Bahamas. The results of the study revealed that teachers generally had positive attitudes toward inclusion. However, lack of funding, administrative support and minimal opportunities for training and development were identified as negative influential factors regarding teachers’ attitude towards inclusive education. Keywords: Attitudes, Inclusive Education, Bahamas, High School*

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Inclusive education is a critical component in the development of the whole child. Inclusion promotes quality and equity education for all, without any type of barrier or exclusion, including those who may be potentially marginalized due to disability, gender, emotional/ behavioral problems, family background, ethnicity, giftedness, migrants, poverty, hearing or visual impairment, language delay, among others. (UNESCO, 1994, p. 6)

Within recent years, there has been a paradigm shift regarding global legislation to incorporate the objectives of the Salamanca Statement (1994) with the view of accommodating inclusive education principles. One such legislation occurred in The United States, The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, which was subsequently revised as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 1990 and later reviewed again in 1997. This act was established to promote a whole school approach to inclusion (Evans & Lunt, 2002). Similarly, all European Union countries have included legislation to promote or require inclusion (European Convention on Human Rights). Within the Caribbean, The Task Force on Education Reform Jamaica (2004) has stipulated that Jamaica will “uphold the fulfillment of human rights, dignity for all persons, and builds continual social progress based on shared values and principles of partnerships.” Moreover, Smith (2007) stated “despite challenges in the Bahamas, measures are continuously being implemented to ensure that special education is embraced to meet the needs of all students” (p. 8). Contrary to the adaption of inclusive education legislation globally, Andrews and Frankel (2010), report that Guyana has yet to implement inclusive education policies, laws and practices for students with special needs despite maintaining a National Policy on the Rights of People with disabilities. The inclusive

education movement has been endorsed internationally by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994) and reflects the United Nations' global strategy of Education for All (Farrell & Ainscow, 2002). Despite this widely accepted approach to inclusive education, Eleweke and Rodda (2000), found that 80% of the world's population of people with disabilities live in developing countries with an estimated 150 million of them being children with 2% receiving any form of special needs service.

Within the educational system, teachers are expected to be the most significant stakeholders of its nation's youth. However, there are still determinants that inhibit teachers from advocating the vision of inclusive education. Andrews and Frankel (2010) recognized major concerns participants expressed about the implementation of inclusive education including inadequate training, lack of skills to teach students with special needs, lack of appropriate infrastructure, and the nonexistence of adapted curricula in the classroom. Each of these factors affected the experiences of the teacher in the inclusive classroom and their attitude towards inclusive education.

On this premise, this study was conducted with the view of exploring high school teachers' attitudes of inclusive education and to determine what factors influence these attitudes. As inclusive education is an issue of great importance within the Bahamas, it is anticipated that the findings from this study would be useful in mitigating negative attitudes of high school teacher regarding inclusion. Further, the study would provide a foundational platform for policy makers, administrators, and teachers with the view of exploring varied instructional methods, and investigating approaches to integrate, diversify, differentiate, train, and support teachers who work in the inclusive classroom setting while addressing the gap in the literature regarding inclusive education in a Bahamian context. Finally, the study aims to sensitize readers about inclusive education and to address the gap in current literature related to the attitudes of teachers toward inclusive education at the high school level.

The theoretical framework guiding this study is based on underpinnings by Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist view of teaching and learning. Vygotsky (1978) believed that knowledge is shaped or constructed through social influences and interactions within one's environment.

## **Research Questions**

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. What are Bahamian teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education in high schools?
2. What do Bahamian teachers perceive as the factors that influence their attitudes towards inclusive education?
3. What are Bahamian teachers' recommendations for promoting best practices for inclusive education at the high school level?

## **A Review of the Literature**

### **Defining Inclusive Education**

The definitions regarding inclusive education vary despite the overarching principle of the right to education all. Stubbs (2008) defined inclusive education as a wide range of strategies, activities and processes that seek to make a reality of the universal right to quality, relevant and appropriate education. UNESCO states:

Inclusion is seen as a process of addressing and responding to the diversity of needs of all learners through increasing participation in learning, cultures, and communities, and reducing exclusion within and from education. ... [As such,] it involves a range of changes and modifications in content, approaches, structures and strategies, with a common vision which covers all children of the appropriate age range and a conviction that it is the responsibility of the regular system to educate all children. (UNESCO, 2005, p. 13)

Further, "Inclusion refers to the opportunity for persons with a disability to participate fully in all of the educational, employment, consumer, recreational, community, and domestic activities that typify everyday society" (Florian, 2005, p. 32). The report of the National Commission on Special Education describes inclusive education as, "a method of educating a child in need of special education in a general education classroom, in the school that child would have attended if not disabled, with age appropriate peers, and with appropriate supports and services" (The National Commission, 2005).

The Salamanca statement therefore serves as an international blue print for defining inclusive education and has implored governments to enforce the principles of its mandate. Some beliefs espoused by the Salamanca Statement include:

- a) every child has a basic right to education,
- b) parents, communities and organization of persons with disabilities should be encouraged to participate in the planning and decision-making processes concerning provision for special educational needs,
- c) governments should give the highest policy and budgetary priority to improve educational systems for all.

### **Attitudes toward Inclusion**

The attitude of teachers is paramount to the successful implementation of inclusive education. Further, evidence from inclusive education literature indicate that teacher attitude, both positive and negative, toward inclusive education are underpinned on certain variables. According to Cipkin and Rizza (n.d.), "attitudes are essential in the success of educating students with disabilities in regular education classrooms, preservice programs should emphasize and concentrate on enhancing teachers attitude towards inclusion" (p. 1). In addition, Valeo (2008) reported that the attitudes of teachers are an important factor to the success of integrative practices in special education.

Educational researchers have taken varied positions regarding inclusion. Proponents Campbell, Gilmore, and Cuskelly, (2003); Gal, Schreur, and Engel-Yeger, (2010); Monsen and Frederickson, (2003) allude that teachers generally held positive views toward inclusion. However, the consensus of Kalyva et al. (2007); Slavica (2010); Andrews and Frankel (2010); Hwang and Evans (2011) is that some teachers are not apparently willing to partake in inclusive education and exhibit a negative attitude. Dupoux et al. (2006) discovered that general education teachers in the primary school in Haiti also seemed more optimistic about accepting inclusive education. Another issue that influenced the attitude of teachers toward inclusive education was the disability of the child. Studies by Gilmore and Cuskelly (2003), Gal et al. (2010), Monsen and Frederickson (2003), and Campbell et al. (2003) also supported these findings.

It is important to examine the attitudes of high school teachers toward inclusion as their views may influence their behavior towards and acceptance of such students. Van Reusen, Shoho, and Barker (2001) hypothesized that "the attitudes and beliefs that teachers,

administrators, and other school personnel hold towards inclusion and the learning ability of students with disabilities may influence school learning environments and the availability of equitable educational opportunities for all students” (p. 8). Based on this assumption, it can be recognized that the attitude of teachers vary from positive to negative based on underlying variables such as barriers, and best practices that will be further analyzed throughout this research study.

### **Factors that Hinder the Adaptation of Inclusive Education**

Although evidence from the Equal Opportunity Commission, 2012 suggests that inclusive education is being considered by most governments, unless the proper framework is established and implemented, there will continue to be a stagnation regarding its successful implementation. The development of inclusive education was examined in various countries including Canada, South Africa, Hong Kong, Russia, Finland, Norway, Turkey, U.S., Korea and some developing countries in Asia-Pacific region. The results showed that resources, manpower, attitude, discrimination, equal learning opportunities and the modes of support prevented the successful introduction of inclusive education (Equal Opportunity Commission, 2012, p. 10).

Slavica (2010), Hwang and Evans (2011), Kalyva et al. (2007), and Fuchs (2010) further reported that lack of support by administrators posed a challenge for inclusive education. Meanwhile, lack of resources (Gaad & Khan, 2007; Kalyva et al., 2007) and insufficient teacher preparation and training hindered the process of inclusion (Ali, Mustapha, & Jelas, 2006; Bigham, 2010; Fuchs, 2010; Slavica, 2010). Teachers experience, education, and collaboration was further identified as a barrier to inclusion (Ali, Mustapha, & Jelas, 2006; Bigham, 2010; Dupoux et al., 2006; Hwang & Evans, 2011; Slavica, 2010). According to Vaughn, Bos, and Schumm, (2011) understanding the limits of personal expertise is vital, and knowing when and how to solicit advice from colleagues with specialized training is important to inclusive education.

Although the systemic barriers that impede the execution of inclusion vary, unless these barriers are addressed, there will still be varying attitudes regarding inclusive education. Several suggestions for facilitating change have already been identified through the National Commission on Special Education Plan, as well as the Framework for Action on Special Needs Education. Continuous planning and action is necessary to support the change required for implementing inclusive education. Moreover, establishing a vision for inclusive education in the Bahamas over the next few years will help stakeholders understand how to respond to these barriers and devise strategies for transformation.

### **Best Methods of Implementing Inclusive Education**

The successful implementation of inclusive education is dependent on a myriad of functional variables to create the ideal system of transition in education as it relates to inclusion.

The underlying premise of the literature was not only to determine the attitudes of teacher’s towards inclusion, but also to evaluate best practices to implement inclusive education. Elweke and Rodda (2001) stated “factors such as the absence of support services, relevant materials and support personnel are the major problems of effective implementation of inclusion” (p. 115).

Gaad and Khan (2006), Hwang and Evans (2011), Fuchs (2010), Dupoux et al. (2006) Hido and Shehu (2010), Brakenreed (2011), and Hsien (2007) agree that the following factors are integral in the implementation of inclusive education; information sharing workshops, time management for planning, adequate resources, reduced class sizes and training for school

administrators will help to promote inclusive education. Further, they consented that collaboration roles and a change in educational values and philosophy are the best methods of establishing an inclusive education. In addition, Slavica (2010) reported that commitment, and a clear vision is needed for a flourishing implementation of students with special needs.

Particular attention must be paid to the effective implementation process that focuses on developing a system that accommodates and respects diversity. This process requires reevaluating strategies, training of teachers and involving the vital participation of social partners and communities so that negative and mixed attitude of inclusive education can be eliminated. To bring about change in inclusive education, according to Oliver (1996) changes must take place at all levels of society. These include differences becoming positively valued, education systems becoming morally committed to the integration of all children into a single education system, schools becoming welcoming environments, teachers becoming committed to working with all children, curricula becoming freed of “disablist” content, and disabled people being given skills to enter the labor market.

### **Recent Studies**

There has been much scholarly debate regarding the attitude of teachers’ toward inclusive education (Campbell et al., 2003; Dupoux, Hammond, Ingalls, & Wolman, 2006; Fuchs, 2010; Gaad & Khan, 2007; Gal Schreur & Engel-Yeger, 2010; Hwang & Evans, 2011; Kalyva, Gojkoric & Tsakiris, 2007; Monsen & Frederickson, 2003; Slavica, 2010; Valeo, 2008).

Campbell, Gilmore, and Cuskelly (2003) surveyed a total of two hundred and seventy four pre-service teacher education students using a questionnaire in Australia. The study was designed to investigate whether favorable changes in attitudes toward disability and inclusion could be fostered by combining formal instruction with structured fieldwork experiences. Their results found that at the end of the semester, that student teachers had acquired more accurate knowledge of Down Syndrome, their attitudes towards disability had changed, and they reported greater ease when interacting with people with disabilities.

After conducting a thorough review of the state of inclusion of students with disabilities in Haiti, Dupoux, Hammond, Ingalls, and Wolman (2006) used the Opinions Relative to Integration survey with teachers in Haiti to investigate their attitude toward inclusion of students with disabilities. Results of the study reveal teachers had moderate levels of acceptance of students with disabilities. Subsequently, teachers who had Masters Degrees had more positive views toward inclusion than teachers with a Bachelor’s Degree. This finding suggests that the education level of the teachers is a possible influential factor on teacher’s attitudes towards implementing inclusive education.

Findings from Gal, Schreur, and Engel-Yeger (2010) also discovered positive attitudes toward inclusion. The study involved fifty three female Jewish teachers who revealed that the age, years of experience, the amount of children in the class and the amount of working hours contributed to their views on inclusive education. Other researchers (Monsen & Frederickson, 2003; Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003) mention that although teachers appeared to support the practice of inclusion, factors such as training and intervention were important to implement inclusion.

Hwang and Evans (2011) study involved thirty three primary school teachers in Korea. The research design employed was both qualitative and quantitative in nature. The purpose of the study was to establish the general education teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion, their willingness to teach students with disabilities and practical problems they encountered in implementation. The results revealed that 41.37% of general education teachers exhibit positive attitudes towards inclusion programs, while 55.16% were unwilling to actually participate.

These findings were attributed to a large majority of teachers (89.64%) alluding to lack of training, support, and resources to implement inclusion.

A similar mixed method study was conducted in Dubai with mainstream classroom teachers teaching students in grades one to six. According to Gaad and Khan (2007) teachers' felt students with special educational needs lack skills needed to master the mainstream regular classroom course content. The teachers also expressed that the heavy teaching load in the mainstream classroom posed difficulties to meet the needs of students with special educational needs. However, results also indicated that teachers perceive additional training, support from administrators, and access to related services and resources as necessary in order to meet the needs of their students with special educational needs in the mainstream education setting.

While previous studies generally support the idea of inclusion, subsequent findings stipulate that teachers generally held negative views toward inclusion. Slavica (2010) examined the attitudes of 105 primary school teachers in Herzegovina-Neretva Canton (HNC) towards the implementation of inclusive education. In this study, results suggest that primary schools in HNC were not prepared for the inclusive education due to the lack of qualified staff, training, and lack of cooperation, inadequate facilities, overcrowded classes, and negative attitudes from the public.

Findings from Kalyva, Gojkoric, and Tsakiris, (2007) also show that Serbian teachers had overall slightly negative attitudes towards the inclusion of children with Special Education Needs. The study incorporated questionnaires to examine the attitude of 72 elementary teachers in 12 inner city Belgrade schools. Researchers suggested that training be revised due to recent introduction in Serbia Universities.

Further, Valeo (2008) explained that the attitudes of teachers are an important factor in the success of integrative practices in special education. Additionally, teachers in this study felt that their efforts at integration are not supported by their administrators.

Fuchs (2010) analyzed and evaluated the stance of teachers as it relates to inclusion. The qualitative study included 5 elementary school teachers and members of a Master's Degree cohort in Teacher Leadership. The findings revealed that most participants agreed that inclusion was a positive educational placement and that both students with/without disabilities benefited from being in the same classroom, but do not favor it in practice because they feel unprepared to meet the demands or responsibilities.

### **Inclusive Education in the Bahamas**

The Bahamian educational system has evolved over the years; The first attempts to provide special services to individuals with special needs is found in the Education Act of 1962 Subsections 24 to 30 (Education Act, 1962) and subsequently in 1972 with the creation of the White Paper on Education. This latter document was the government's statement of basic policies for the development of education in the nation prior to independence in 1973 (White Paper on Education, 1973). It outlines the government's commitment to keep under active review the needs of individuals requiring special education and promises of programs of assistance and training. Subsequent legislation governing special education programs include the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education, 1994, and the Education Act of 1996. As a signee of UNESCO's Salamanca Statement, the Bahamas is obligated to serve all children with special needs and accommodate them in the regular education classroom in spite of their disability type or severity.

Very little research has been conducted on Inclusive Education in The Bahamas. Consequently, public school teachers' perceptions towards this practice and its practicality in Bahamian public schools are unknown. In 2003, Prime Minister Perry Christie launched the National Commission on Special Education with a mandate to evaluate the demand and

requirements for providing special education and related services (Gardiner-Farquharson, Bain, & Cooper, 2003). Members of the Commission included parents, individuals with special needs, teachers, administrators, policy makers, health professionals and other resource persons. Following the establishment of the Commission, a designated group of the Commission traveled various islands of The Bahamas, organizing and conducting more than 150 meetings. Additionally, evaluations were conducted in several areas including organizational structures, human resources, programs, curricula and legislative reforms (Gardiner-Farquharson et al., 2003). Findings revealed that out of a sample of 21,173 school-age children, 5,396 required special education and related services.

Presently in The Bahamas, the majority of Bahamian classrooms are comprised of students with varying disabilities (emotional, physical, mental, and learning), and these students are failing to meet the requirements of their various grade levels due to inadequate interventions critical to addressing their individual needs (Ministry of Education National Commission on Special Education, 2005). In terms of the composition of the public primary schools' classrooms, however, one can assume that inclusion exists. Coupled with low achievement, is the fact that many of the Bahamian public schools are comprised of a large number of foreign nationals, for whom language and cultural barriers exist, preventing academic success for these students.

Some of the recommendations of the National Commission on Special Education included expansion of human and financial resources, implementation of early intervention services, parent services, and proper accommodations for students with disabilities, development of special education curricula, professional development activities, parental involvement activities, a national assistive technology initiative and an adequate management and monitoring framework for delivering special education. The general consensus among committee members of the Commission was that children with special needs were too often forgotten and neglected in the Bahamas (Gardiner-Farquharson et al., 2003). In an attempt to serve all children with special needs, the government formally instituted inclusion. According to Stubbs (2008), inclusion gained momentum when the Director of Education, Cecil Thompson, addressing the Third Annual Autism Awareness Special Assembly, announced that no longer would any institutions be allowed to prohibit the entrance of students with special needs to their facilities, particularly the public schools.

In addition to lack of resources for the facility of inclusive education, The Bahamas lacks norm-referenced assessments. This is important, for the country needs to have nationwide standards with norm groups so that qualitative decisions can be made as to how to remedy the needs of all learners in the country. All national exams (The Grade Level Assessment Test, Bahamas Junior Certificate and Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education) all Criterion-Referenced Tests that do not ethically make special accommodations for students with disabilities such as hearing impaired students that have to partake in Listening Comprehension exams, or the visually impaired child. Policy makers will need to revisit and modify standards of the national examinations to accommodate the need of all students.

Despite the creation of the Education Act and its amendments and official legal documents supporting assistance for children with special needs, segregation continues to be common practices within the Bahamian society. In public high schools within The Bahamas, the homerooms within each grade level are streamed in relation to academic ability. Advocacy groups in the Bahamas have been dauntless in their efforts to gain more support and assistance for children with special needs. Still the majority of students with special needs do not receive appropriate educational experiences with many of them isolated in separate educational facilities, never interacting with or engaging in academic communities with their typically developing peers.

No study has been found that examined the existence or possibility of Inclusive Education within The Bahamas. Further, with the exception of a study conducted by Stubbs (2008), no other study has been found that has examined the attitudes of general education teachers in grades one through six toward inclusion in New Providence, Bahamas. Stubbs' (2008) study revealed that general education teachers have a positive attitude towards the benefits of inclusion, a negative attitude toward their ability to teach children with special needs in their general education classrooms and a negative attitude toward the concept of inclusion. According to Stubbs, three demographic factors affected the teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusion; these included teacher training in inclusive classrooms, higher level of education, and experience teaching children with special needs.

The review of literature represents varying views about inclusion from around the world. Unfortunately insufficient data exists in relation to inclusive education in The Bahamas. Trends between researchers show that most teachers have a positive attitude towards inclusive education due to the amount of training, support, and level of disability. On the other hand, the negative views toward inclusion could be attributed to lack of support, inexperience, level of disability, inadequate classroom, and negative attitudes from the public. Based on findings from the previous studies the assumption can be made that teachers' attitudes will affect their behavior once they have been supported and trained about how to accommodate students with special needs. Additionally, training and knowledge is a fundamental reality that must be reviewed for the advancement of inclusion.

### **Authors Interest in the Field of Inclusive Education in the Bahamas**

Dr. Hunter-Johnson is currently an Assistant Professor in the School of Education. One of her many responsibilities in Adult Education and Teacher Education includes supervising students enrolled in the Master's Degree in Literacy and Inclusive Education. She is currently conducting research on inclusive education in the Bahamas and its implication for teacher education and adult education. Janelle Cambridge and Norrisa Newton are recent graduates from the Master's Degree Program at The College of the Bahamas in the Literacy and Inclusive Education Program. Both ladies are currently employed with the Ministry of Education as teachers and are actively teach in an all-inclusive classroom.

## **Method**

### **Setting of Study**

The Ministry of Education is the governing institution for education in the Bahamas. There are fourteen (14) school districts: four (4) on the island of New Providence and ten (10) throughout the Family Islands. Each district is led by a Superintendent, who reports to the Director and facilitates the provision of services to schools. All children between the ages of 5 and 16 years are required to be enrolled in an approved educational program (Education Act Ch. 46). Additionally, education is free for all persons in public school system in the Bahamas irrespective of socioeconomic background, gender, physical or mental ability. A total of one hundred and thirteen (113) primary and all-age schools, thirty-four (34) junior and senior high schools, and eleven (11) Special Education Schools are registered in the Bahamas.

Within the Bahamas, there has been much discussion regarding special education and by extension, the all-inclusive classroom. However, it was not until the establishment of The Education Act (1962) that special education and special services for children with special needs were formalize and delineated (Stubbs, 2008). Since then, the government of the Bahamas in conjunction with the Inter-Development Bank has made much advances regarding special

education and by extension all inclusive education. Since 1962, the government of the Bahamas has sponsored graduate programs in Literary and Inclusive Education at the local college, implemented special education units within mainstream education, and designated special task forces with a focal point of inclusive education. During 2003, it was estimated that 5,396 students were noted as having special needs, a combined total of 3,236 were categorized as slow learners or remedial (The National Commission on Special Education, 2005).

## **Research Design**

The research methodology used in this study was qualitative utilizing techniques from phenomenology and was reflective of semi-structured interviews with participants using preset questions.

## **Participants**

The sample consisted of eight ( $n = 8$ ) high school teachers who participated in the study of which 87.5% were females and 12.5% male. The participants ranged from teacher to subject coordinator of which 50% of them were subject coordinators and 50% were teachers. Half of the participants (50%) were between the ages of 40 and 44 years. Teaching experience varied between one and twenty years. Three teachers taught between 1-5 years (37.5%); two teachers had 6-10 years of experience (25%); one teacher had 15 years of teaching experience (12.5%), and 2 teachers taught between 16-20 years (25%). The academic level varied and included teachers with Bachelor's Trained, (50%); and Master's Degree Trained, (50%). The participants were selected utilizing convenience sampling of schools that are in the New Providence District of the Bahamas. Convenience sampling was utilized, because of feasibility and access to the participants (Andrews & Frankel, 2010). Further, participants were selected as they were available, interested and possessed the characteristics necessary to participate in this research which included

- a) employed with Ministry of Education full time at the secondary level,
- b) employed in the district of New Providence, and
- c) included both genders. Participants were informed of their rights in compliance with the Institutional Review Board.

## **Data Collection**

Participants of the study were informed of their rights prior to part-taking in the study and data being collected. Interviews were conducted by an interview team of two person. One person was designated as the interviewer and the other as the note taker. Prior to the interview, participants were asked to complete a participant demographic sheet. Interviews adhered to a semi structure interview protocol and were recorded using audio tape recording. On completion of the interview, the recordings were immediately transcribed verbatim and compared with the notes of the note taker.

## **Data Analysis**

Utilizing the research objectives coupled with the theoretical framework as a platform, data analysis was analyzed using opening coding to establish themes and main concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Recurring topics in the text were recognized as themes and sub-themes. A table of central themes and sub-themes was constructed. This process allowed a

deeper understanding and explanation of issues that were being studied. To ensure greater validity and reliability a peer reviewer read through the data to ensure themes and categories corresponded with the research questions. The findings were synthesized according to the aspects of teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, and other related matters concerning the successful implementation of inclusive education.

## Findings

The findings from this study revealed that teachers at the high school level in The Bahamas demonstrated moderately positive attitudes toward inclusion and was consistent with previous studies conducted internationally (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Gal, Schreur, & Engel-Yeger, 2010; Monsen, & Frederickson, 2003).

### Research Question 1

What are Bahamian teachers' attitudes towards inclusive education in high schools?

Teachers understood inclusive education to connote a variety of meanings. "Inclusive education is the provision of educational instruction to a diverse group of students in one class no matter their differences" said one teacher. Another responded, "inclusive education is a type of education that includes all learners (autistic, hearing impaired, those with behavioral problems etc.). Inclusive education...eliminates segregation in the school." Another teacher suggested, "inclusive education dictates that all students and are welcome by their neighborhood schools in age appropriate regular classes and are supported to learn, contribute, and participate in all aspects of the life of the school."

The majority of participants (62.5%) made statements which revealed that they had positive views toward inclusion. One participant expressed that, "I think it is an exceptional idea because children can learn from each other and teachers can collaborate on best practices." Another participant avowed, "I believe that as a Bahamian citizen, everybody has a right to education and a right to learn. Therefore, inclusive education should be implemented in order to create a more wholesome and adequate learning environment." Another response was:

I feel that this [inclusive education] should be implemented especially within the high school setting because as a teacher I have seen students just give up because they feel they are not smart enough and some have even expressed that they do not get the attention the smarter students are receiving.

Subsequently, some teachers (25%) welcomed the idea of inclusion, but exhibited mixed feelings toward the idea of inclusive education. The teachers believed that certain factors were necessary for inclusion to be effective. For example, one teacher said, "at this time, I believe inclusive education is already happening. In order for it to be implemented better students need to be properly tested and teachers need to be trained. Resources must be in place and aides available." One teacher commented, "I believe inclusive education can be embraced in all stages. If disabilities are categorized and some of the less severe disabilities can initiate the process then we can gauge how effective it is." Subsequently, one participant perceived inclusion as negative and in irate voice she expressed, "I did not train to teach students with special needs because I don't have the patience." This comment suggests that training will play a critical role in how teachers' perceive inclusive education.

Teachers also commented on the general attitude of teachers regarding inclusive education at the high school level. As one teacher shared, “many teachers may not have the ability to plan and execute lessons to all ability levels.

Another teacher mentioned:

Some teachers oppose the idea of implementing inclusive education simply because...they feel that it would be very tedious and time consuming. Others...argue that inclusive education ensures no one is left behind and that everyone learns.” In addition, “the general attitude, I believe is not favorable. There is a negative stigma attached to students with special needs. I believe that the educational system has caused this. It basically shows that if you can’t pass national exams, then you are not smart.

A veteran educator expressed that, “in the high school level most teachers are not open to inclusive education. There has always been a separation as it relates to how children are categorized for the various schools.”

**Table 1.** Influential Factors of Teacher’s Attitude

| <b>Negative Influential Factors</b> | <b>n</b> | <b>%</b> |
|-------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Resources                           | 7        | 88%      |
| Training                            | 5        | 63%      |
| Lack of information                 | 4        | 50%      |
| Administration support              | 3        | 38%      |
| Funding                             | 2        | 25%      |

**Table 2:** Influential Factors of Teacher’s Attitude

| <b>Positive Influential Factors</b> | <b>n</b> | <b>%</b> |
|-------------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Equal opportunity for students      | 7        | 88%      |
| Training for teachers               | 5        | 63%      |
| Eliminate stigma toward inclusion   | 4        | 50%      |
| Differentiated instruction          | 3        | 38%      |
| Funding                             | 2        | 25%      |

Most of the teachers collectively agreed that they were receptive to teaching students with various disabilities. One commented, “all students should be afforded the opportunity to get an education.” Another teacher affirmed, “it will depend on the disability. Physical and learning disabilities could be grouped together in a class setting, but the mental and emotional disabilities could be grouped together.” A senior teacher surmised that:

Although I believe that everyone has a right to learn, I do not believe that students with such disabilities should be placed in a regular classroom setting at first. I believe they should be taught in an environment with others who are disabled and then slowly be up graded to a regular classroom. In doing so, the child will not feel as though they are just thrown into an environment that they know nothing about.

From the eight participants interviewed, two (25%) of the teachers did not have exposure to inclusive education. All of the respondents (100%), despite their views of inclusion were willing to participate in additional training and felt that ongoing training was important to disseminate current and research based best practices regarding inclusion.

## **Research Question 2**

What do Bahamian teachers perceive as the factors that influence their attitudes towards inclusive education?

The participants were asked specifically to list in order of priority five possible factors that negatively influence their attitudes toward inclusion. The following categories were identified and ranked from highest to lowest:

- a) lack of resources (87.5%),
- b) insufficient training (62.5%),
- c) inadequate information about inclusive education (50%), lack of support (37.5%), and administrative support (25%). Subsequently, teachers also listed positive factors that influenced on attitudes.

Results confirmed that the following factors in order of significance:

- a) equal opportunity for students (87.5%),
- b) training opportunities (62.5%),
- c) eliminate stigma toward inclusive education (50%), (d) differentiated instruction (37.5%), and funding (25%).

When questioned about the obstacles that may hinder the implementation of inclusive education at the high school level, responses were analyzed and the following themes emerged

- a) training,
- b) knowledge,
- c) resources and facilities,
- d) support,
- e) funding, and
- f) class size.

## **Training**

Training plays a critical role in the effective implementation of inclusive education. A teacher commented that, “teachers need to be trained about the different disabilities and strategies or interventions. Further, they would need to be trained on how to develop a curriculum for their students that would speak to the students’ needs and assessment.” Supporting this comment, another teacher said that training is important because teachers, administrators, parents, and students need to be aware of the latest trends and best practices in inclusive education. A similar view expressed by another participant was, “introduce seminars and working sessions to empower educators to facilitate lessons for special need students. This would help improve the stigma that engulfs inclusive education.” A final comment on this theme by another participant was, “the student and the teacher should be sensitized to work around and with these students. These students with disabilities have needs that must be met

by the teacher; hence that teacher should have the tools, resources, abilities, and adequate training.” None of the participants have a formal degree in Special Education hence the need for more education and training to make the implementation of inclusive education more successful.

### **Knowledge**

The participants of this study appeared to be concerned about the limited knowledge on inclusive education. One of the participants stated, “all teachers must be educated as to what inclusive education means. Another emphasized, “If teachers have not been adequately trained, then they will not feel confident enough to teach all students.” One teacher said, “the need for periodic training, workshops, and seminars could be used to relay information to teachers on inclusive education.” These sentiments were further affirmed by another participant who replied, “of course teachers must be knowledgeable about special needs and have the training of how to deal with students. Teachers must also be made aware of any condition students have, so that they are able to respond properly during a crises. This can be done with ongoing seminars and workshops.”

### **Resources and facilities**

Teachers who had favorable views of inclusive classrooms emphasized the need to address the structural problems and limited resources to facilitate effective implementation of inclusive education. One of the participants of the study revealed, “I am not against inclusive education. However, I feel that the facilities and resources would need to be in place.” One teacher commented, “lack of resources...teaching [the] regular student is a challenge because the school lacks sufficient supplies. Could you imagine lacking the resources to teach students with special needs that require more resources? It would be very strenuous.” Another teacher strongly expressed, “I don’t see how this will work without proper training and resources.” A similar response by another teacher articulated, “these factors [resources, finances, training] are extremely important for the implementation of inclusive education to be effective because materials and resources must be available for all students.”

When asked to comment on facilities one teacher said, “If inclusive education is implemented there should be facilities to accommodate the students that may have physical or mental handicaps and resources for the education of those students to be a success.” In agreement with this statement a different teacher said, “each school would have to be redesigned for ramps, audio, and visual equipments.”

In spite of challenges that face the implementation of inclusion, participants also mentioned some possible features that may promote inclusive education at the secondary level. One teacher asserted “selecting teachers who are willing to teach the inclusive classroom, ongoing training seminars and workshops, financial aid from the government, the support of parents, the school (teachers, administrators, and community), proper facilities, and technology.” Another teacher expressed that, “leadership, school climate, curriculum, individual student support, collaborative planning, and professional development are important.”

All participants were adamant that finances, method of instruction, resources, training, and the curriculum were crucial to inclusion practices. This stance was supported by one teacher who affirmed, “finances play an important role as it is the overall capsule for inclusiveness. Without materials, assistance, proper accommodations, we will never be able to properly provide the level of instruction required for inclusion of students within the normal classroom setting. Until proper systems are put in place...we will have teachers babysitting

students.” Another teacher commented, “adequate funding is very important especially for pilot projects that need to be maintained and continuously enhanced. The training of specific teachers in the field of inclusive education will be an asset as these teachers will meet the needs of special needs students.”

Subsequently, all teachers purported that the following training is necessary for teachers to be effective and efficient as an inclusive educator:

- a) workshops,
- b) degrees in field of special education,
- c) first aid courses,
- d) courses on differentiated instruction, and
- e) courses on intervention strategies.

### **Research Question 3**

What are Bahamian teachers recommendations for promoting best practices for inclusive education at the high school level?

This research has identified a number of factors which can contribute to the development of the teacher’s attitude towards inclusive education at the high school level. These factors cannot function properly in isolation. However, they must be incorporated and aligned to meet the needs of all learners. Responses were thematically analyzed.

#### **Support**

The Department of Education is charged with the responsibility of supporting the implementation of inclusive education. The interviews indicated that this organization has not adequately supported teachers. One teacher stated, “if the department of education would offer courses in inclusive education, then teachers would feel more confident in teaching in an inclusive environment.” Another teacher replied, “policy makers will have to make certain that proper tools are in place for the success of inclusive education.”

While the Department of Education is instrumental in supporting inclusion initiatives collaboration is vital. One teacher shared, “for inclusive education to be a success, stakeholders involved must be willing participants. There should be no rushed decisions; all avenues must be well planned and thought-out. Additionally, policy makers’ must have the funds in place for adequate training of teachers, facilities, and resources for students. Each school would have to be redesigned for ramps, audio, and visual equipments.”

#### **Funding**

Funding by government to support inclusive education is necessary because it serves as the foundation for educational programs to be successful. It was discovered that direct funding is not allotted to secondary school teachers for buying equipment and materials, training, and support for the inclusive classroom. When one of the teachers was asked about this issue she confirmed, “finances play an important role as it is the overall capsule for inclusiveness. Without material, assistance, and proper accommodation, we will never be able to properly provide the level of instruction required for inclusion of students within the normal classroom setting.” Reflecting on the issue of funding another teacher acknowledged, “adequate funding is very important especially for pilot projects that need to be maintained and continuously enhanced.”

### **Class size**

The participants expressed frustration about the class sizes they have to contend with in the secondary schools. One teachers' frustration was reflected in the following remark, "class sizes need to be reduced and additional teachers need to be employed." It appeared that the teachers' effectiveness would also be influenced by student teacher ratio. One of the participants was explicit about class size, "class sizes should be small enough to be able to meet the needs of each student. This should be between 10–15 students." Another response was, "class sizes would have to be reduced to allow the teacher sufficient time to accommodate all the students or a train aide in the class to assist." In addition to class size, one teacher commented that, "the size of the school may not be big enough, the school might not have a culture of acceptance, and teachers may not be willing to engage students."

### **Curriculum and instruction**

Most respondents suggested curriculum revision to integrate workforce ready skills, and diverse learning activities. Additionally, the review of the curriculum to incorporate the special needs student will also positively impact the program because it will require teachers to prepare lessons that will meet the needs of all students. One respondent asserted, "teachers must be familiar with intervention strategies through professional development, incorporate all levels from blooms taxonomy in instruction, Peer coach and experiment with project based learning."

### **Best practices**

In an effort to remain on cutting edge information, one teacher articulated, "collaboration with other teachers in the field, attending annual conferences, securing membership in professional organizations, and implementing research based practices will bolster the confidence of teacher efficacy in developing a positive attitude towards inclusive education." Another teacher said, "the support from government, administrators, teachers, and parents will begin the dialogue to establish policies and procedures to successfully implement inclusive at the secondary level."

### **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to examine the attitude of high school teachers towards inclusive education in The Bahamas. Results of the study were consistent with findings from researchers (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Gal, Schreur, & Engel-Yeger, 2010; Monsen & Frederickson, 2003) which suggested that teachers generally had a positive attitude toward inclusion.

The findings further revealed that insufficient training, lack of knowledge and skills of teachers were the overarching theme that resulted in teachers feeling a sense of inadequacy to teach in an inclusive education classroom. These findings were consistent with Bigham (2010) and Ali et al. (2006), who also found a correlation between attitudes and training. To circumvent this phenomena, it is of utmost importance that mainstream teachers who would be required to teach in an inclusive classroom receive relevant training to ensure they are equipped with the knowledge, skills and abilities to effectively execute best practices within the learning environment and to encourage the ideology of inclusion. Such training initiatives could include but is not limited to:

- a) in-depth courses with a focal point on accommodating students with special needs,
- b) periodic seminars and workshops for training in teaching diverse learners,
- c) promotional videos of inclusion in action at the school level,
- d) training for parents and the school community,
- e) technology,
- f) first aid training, and
- g) annual professional development training on inclusive education.

In an attempt to encourage a positive attitude towards inclusive education and to ensure that teachers value inclusive education training, it is suggested that teachers' participation in the training be evaluated and taken into consideration for their end of year performance evaluation. In addition, the knowledge gained from these professional development would provide an opportunity for peer coaching, research based strategies, and interventions which could improve attitudes of teachers regarding inclusive education and the overall success rate of implementation strategies within the classroom.

It is imperative that teachers portray a positive attitude towards inclusive education. Contrary attitudes of teachers (negative attitudes) towards students can affect the manner in which students learn and socialize. Further, teachers who are not open to the inclusion concept is minimizing the opportunities for students to enhance their socialization skills, an important component to the learning process

It is evident that the inclusion of students with disabilities into regular classrooms is additionally viewed as fostering increased feelings of understanding and respect among all participants within the inclusive setting. However, a student's level of disability may emerge as a factor shaping the attitudes of teachers to the inclusion of students with disabilities. Moreover, participants in this study preferred to teach learners with mild disabilities as opposed to learners with severe behavioral, intellectual, and hearing challenges. These mainstream teachers were of the opinion that such learners would need additional assistance, proper resources and technology, and the proper training to meet learners' needs. These findings are consistent with recent literature that established that while teachers were positive about inclusive education they still preferred to include certain categories of learners (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Gal, Schreur, & Engel-Yeger, 2010; Monsen & Frederickson 2003).

Additionally, teachers were adamant that access to resources and support from administrators for teachers and students would prove beneficial to the implementation of inclusive education at the secondary level as consistent with previous research (Fuchs, 2010; Hwang & Evans, 2011; Kalyva et al., 2007; Slavica 2010). To this end, it is paramount that school administration and relevant authority figures ensure all resources are made available, properly maintained and teachers and students are properly training with the usage of all resources. Further, administrators could be more visible and exhibit a supportive environment for teachers, students and parents. This supportive environment can be augmented in collaboration with parents and teachers with the introduction of support groups, educational sessions and a more "hands on approach" to the inclusive classroom. In addition, the government should consider the long term-effects of substantial financing of inclusion practices as it relates to the investment of necessary resources, facilities and professionals needed to make the idea of inclusion veracity.

Large class size is evidently a concern not only regarding inclusive education but also mainstream education. To this end, more challenges may be evidently visible in an inclusive classroom compared to mainstream education classroom. On this premise, it is imperative that class sizes are kept at a minimum and a teacher's aide available to assist.

### **Implications for the Educational System**

This study has much implications for the educational system in the Bahamas. Firstly, it sensitizes teachers (mainstream and inclusive) regarding perceptual influential factors which may inhibit the successful implementation and execution of inclusive education. Secondly, the study identified possible recommendation and best practices that would aid teachers, administrators and parents regarding inclusive education. Thirdly, the study served as a platform for future studies in the Bahamas in the field of inclusive education.

Fourthly, the research suggests that the more sustainability that educators have for inclusion, the more effective its implementation would be. Therefore, it is probable that the modification and implementation of future legislation and policies will increase greater awareness of the needs and rights of special needs children. To this end, it is paramount that once these elements have been established, curriculum specialists and other stakeholders would revisit the national curriculum to ensure the infusion of an inclusive education curriculum. Consequently, a revised curriculum would also entail revised assessments. Currently, The Bahamas has no norm-referenced assessments for inclusive education. Such assessments are crucial for the country to ensure there are nationwide standards with norm groups so that qualitative decisions can be made as to how to remedy the needs of all learners in the country. All national exams (The Grade Level Assessment Test, Bahamas Junior Certificate and Bahamas General Certificate of Secondary Education) are Criterion-Referenced Tests that do not ethically make special accommodations for students with disabilities such as hearing impaired students that have to partake in Listening Comprehension exams, or the visually impaired child. Policy makers will need to revisit and modify standards of the national examinations to accommodate the need of all students.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers' attitude plays a pivotal role regarding the successful implementation of inclusive education. On this premise, this study was conducted to determine the attitude of high school teachers in the Bahamas regarding inclusive education. Further to determine possible influential factors regarding their attitude. The study revealed that high school teachers within the Bahamas generally had a positive attitude towards inclusive education. However, the major themes that emerged regarding influential factors of teachers' attitude were

- a) training,
- b) knowledge,
- c) resources and facilities,
- d) support,
- e) funding, and
- f) class size.

The study has much implications (theoretical and practical) for the educational system in the Bahamas. First, it contributes to the gap in literature regarding inclusive education in the Bahamas. Second, it serves as a foundation to policy makers regarding influential factor of teachers' attitude in regards to inclusive education which is crucial to the successful implementation of inclusive education. Third, it provides possible recommendation and best practices regarding the successful implementation of inclusive education. Last, this paper serves as a foundational platform for future research on inclusive education in the Bahamas and by extension the Caribbean.

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